

# The Time Chronicles: A Race Against Time

## Prologue

### The Beginning

*"200-meter freestyle women, heat 7. Make yourself ready!"*

The music pounds over the speakers in the worn-down Surrey Swim Arena, making the crowd in the stands seem larger than it is. Kids and their parents have gathered to witness the ultimate showdown between the two best swim clubs in the south of England: the West London Sharks and the Surrey Bears. Colorful signs with encouraging words and drawings of bears and sharks fill the stands. Harvey's team laughs at the teddy bear-like drawings, confident they can't lose to such a crowd.

The brightest, most sparkly sign of them all is held up by a proud, skinny, tall boy with double curly brown hair and beautiful blue eyes. Harvey's best friend, Troy, has brought out his glitter pens and artistic skills for the event, writing "GET THEM HARVEY!" in the club's signature teal color. He waves and shouts enthusiastically as she emerges from the women's locker room. "That's my best friend! That's my best friend! And she's gonna win! Oh yes, she is!" Troy is so busy spreading the word to fellow spectators that it takes him a while to notice Harvey has stopped to wave back. "See, that's my best friend!" he tells the guy next to him, pointing.

Harvey throws her head back, laughing, and mimics him, "That's my best friend!" Troy pretends to swoon, making the slender and short figure beside him smile before stiffening at his sudden actions. Her tension fades as she catches the younger copy of herself's eyes. She holds her thumbs up to her daughter, mouthing what Harvey interprets as 'good luck.' The small swimmer nods and smiles at some kids shouting her name.

"Harvey, that's you!" The coach puts a firm hand on the back of her neck, guiding her toward the pool.

There are twelve swim clubs competing in the finale, but everyone knows the best teams are the Bears and the Sharks. Every year, it's these two at the top. Last year, due to a series of unfortunate events—avoidable mistakes and injuries—the Bears had won, in the Sharks' own pool. This has made Coach Thor unable to stop sweating for a year. Known for being restless, always with a can of Coke in his hand, jiggling belly, and shiny bald head, Thor has never been this stressed. There's no way they're losing today.

"Okay," he announces, cutting through the crowd's shouts. "This is it! You're going to swim so fucking fast! You will be a flash in that pool, you hear me?"

"Like lightning," Harvey answers, trying to keep up with Thor's loud voice.

Something concerning flashes in his eyes. "You will electrocute the other contestants!"

"Wait, what?" she asks, confused.

"Just win!" Thor sends her off toward the diving blocks with two firm thumbs up.

The other contestants are already lined up with their swimming caps and goggles on. Harvey steps confidently onto her block, stretching her back tall among her competitors. Her skin prickles with goosebumps from the intense stares of the crowd. The pressure on her shoulders feels like bricks packed with adrenaline. She's ready to go.

One last time, she shakes out her hands and feet and locks her vision on the lane ahead. She follows the row of dark blue tiles down the middle of her lane, picturing herself swimming directly over it. Rotating her arms by her ears as she has trained for years, she paddles her feet as if she's never done anything else because she hasn't.

On Harvey's side is Elizabeth McMiller, or "Elizabeth Long Legs" as Harvey calls her. Tan, with long, dark hair like Pocahontas, Elizabeth is the only person Harvey fears in the pool—but she'd never admit it. They've been nemeses since their first race in Year 1. Harvey knows their rivalry has made her the athlete she is today, but she'd never tell Elizabeth that either.

The music lowers as a woman's voice breaks through the speakers. "Get ready!"

Coach Thor stands by the poolside, slightly bent at the knees as if he's about to jump in. The harsh, white lights in the arena reflect off his shiny head. "Lightning!" he repeats, smacking his hands together. Her team, fifteen cold swimmers wrapped in towels, with excited looks on their faces, has come out from the locker rooms. At the pool's edge, beside the coach, is Alexander, her boyfriend. His dark blond hair points in every direction after removing his swim cap. He chants excitedly, filling her with another level of confidence. If Harvey wins this race, she not only defeats Elizabeth but secures the overall victory for her team. The pressure is on, but she breathes through it with ease.

She pulls the tinted goggles down over her eyes. The shaded view almost relaxes her, effortlessly bringing her into the headspace she needs. Her swim cap secures her wild, red hair, and she swings her arms by her sides one last time, shaking out her legs. *I am strong. I am fierce. And I will win*, she tells herself.

"Into positions!"

One foot goes behind the other, resting actively against the angled board piece. All the swimmers bend forward with their hands hanging loosely down. Two anxious seconds pass as they wait for the signal, and then there's the beep. All the swimmers' hands grip the front of their diving blocks. Harvey stares down past the blue waterline as if jumping into the pool is like jumping into herself.

The squeaky start beep rings out, and Harvey immediately breaks the water surface with ease, gliding forward. Like a climber finding holds in mountain walls, she finds handles in the water, pulling herself forward while kicking the water away from her feet. She reaches the pool's end, tosses her body into a roll, finds the wall with her feet, and kicks off with as much force as possible.

By the third kickoff, she knows she's ahead. Thor's enthusiastic shouts ring through the water, growing louder. It fuels her, being in the lead this early. But it also means she has to work even harder, because if her focus slips, so will the medal.

Lap five, three to go.

Every time she tips her head up to the surface, the crowd's shouts grow louder than ever before, adding a physical pressure in her head like standing by a speaker with an insane bass. She catches Thor's wild, icy eyes by the poolside, and that's all she needs to go faster. An athlete's forever challenge: how to make the body do what it can't?

Harvey grits her teeth and lets more time pass between breaths. She can't risk hearing what the crowd is shouting. Halfway through the sixth lap, her lungs burn, but she pushes through. *Fuck*, she screams inwardly, making her kicks more pointed and her arms tighter against her ears. The sloppy form causes her underarms to smack against the water surface. What's happening to her?

Lap seven. *I can't breathe*. Every move hurts, but she can't stop; their victory is on the line. *Break*. The lack of oxygen plays games with her vision, and a dark shadow grows below her. *Break*. The shadow becomes larger. *Break*. The shadow swallows her. *BREAK!*

Her body collides with the water as everything comes to a sudden stop. She gasps frantically as the pressure tightens around her, clawing at her chest as she chokes down salty water. Spasms shoot through her body, her lungs screaming for air. It burns like electricity through her veins. The space around her darkens, growing pitch black. Far, far above, the darkness lights up like a distant star in the night sky, but there's no way she'll reach it in time. Fighting the spasms, she tries to pull herself up, but she doesn't move an inch.

*I'm gonna die*, she realizes with horror as the power seeps out of her. Her body grows limp, limbs stopping one by one. Her own choking sobs sound like hollow howls in the distance. *Where am I?*

A stillness finds her as the last air bubble forms between her lips and rises to the surface. She watches it go with a limp stare. The water grows colder, and though she's undoubtedly sinking, it feels like she's rising. In the dark, she spots her pale legs, her torso rising to head level. Her dark red bathing suit looks purple in the dark. Despite her lungs being completely gone, she manages to reach her arms out to the sides as if surrendering to the deep.

Something smooth brushes against her leg. She twitches, alarmed.

“Don’t be so overdramatic, you’re not dying,” a dark rumbling voice finds her in the thick water.

*Do I really have to keep fighting?* she thinks, whining. The sudden attitude change feels like a split personality taking over. Harvey is dying, so who’s talking back to the voice? *I’m tired.*

The darkening edges of her vision are tempting. A shadow moves over her, blocking the last speck of light. Its fin wags from side to side over her head, making her hair twirl in the little waves it leaves behind.

“Oh, come on, Harvey, you didn’t even race me.” He laughs mockingly, but it comes out more like a snarl.

A shiver runs through her from his haunting voice saying her name. Her heart, which she thought had stopped, pounds hard in her chest. Something comes alive within her, like a spark she didn’t ask for. *Can you let me die?* she begs, feeling her hands twitch like they do before a competition.

“I would kill you myself if I could. But you’re under His protection, so you have to keep fighting. Everyone wants their blessings, but they forget they always come with a price.” His voice becomes so loud Harvey feels the waves of it in her hair like wind by a busy road. “Pay your price!”

Something hard strikes her legs. She sees them disappear between two sets of sharp, pearly whites. Harvey gasps and tries to push the beast away, clawing at its smooth skin even though she can’t see more than its teeth.

Reality glitches, and she’s out of its hold. She whimpers in pain, checking several times to ensure she’s not dreaming; her legs are still there. She paddles with all her might to get away. Miraculously, more air bubbles escape her lips. The oxygen is back in her lungs, and this time it never runs out.

*Who sent you?* a voice from the back of her throat grumbles, even though all she wants to scream is ‘Get me out of here!’

“It’s a whisper in your subconscious,” he answers, lurking behind her. By mistake, she glances back, hissing as the Great White lights up from its belly. Only its dead eyes stand out, darker than the depths of death.

*Their name*, she snarls, grabbing the water in front of her and throwing it back at him.

The beast swims up beside her, hitting her with its back fin. “They’ve already told you.”

Harvey twists to look it directly in its horrifying eyes, but it slows down and swims behind her. This time, the pain is undeniable. She screams, tucking her legs to her stomach, only to find there’s nothing to tuck. The salty taste is camouflaged by a thick, sickening taste of iron. The pain is like a phantom, haunting and deadly, but also made of something that no longer exists. She screams louder, despite the sound being muffled. *I’m gonna die. I’m gonna die*, she repeats, retching as she hears its taunting voice in her head.

*You’re not making it through this one.*

It bites her. Her veins start burning. The dark ocean lights up with her flames, revealing hidden gems. Small and larger fish float among deep-green seaweed. Harvey is blinded by her own light, seeing only shadows of tentacles and fishtails.

To her surprise, her joy doesn’t discourage the shark. His evil grin remains as he floats in a pool of red, with its source hanging from between his teeth.

Her smile disappears as she looks down and sees one of her legs has been bitten off, leaving her with one pale, bloody leg and a gushing stump where the other used to be.

Her arms splash on the water’s surface as cold air rushes over her hands. Her body slams into the tiled wall of the pool. A loud groan escapes her lungs, followed by a forceful cough. The noise echoes, making her duck down protectively. Only when Coach Thor’s loud roar breaks through the chaos of voices does she understand the crowd is chanting her name. The light blue pool water is back, her tinted goggles and swim cap still on, despite her long locks having floated free seconds before.

Elizabeth surfaces in the lane next to her, not giving Harvey a glance to hide her disappointment. Harvey rubs her face hard, trying to take it all in. Two chunky, hairy arms wrap around her waist, pulling her up over the cold, hard edge of the pool. To her surprise, the water rolls off with ease—no blood, no flesh, just legs.

“You did it!” Thor screams in her ear, panting against her shoulder.

Sat on the cold floor, she looks up at her team. They look like grinning teal eggs with their swim caps still on. “What did I do?”

Thor’s double chin shakes as he shouts, “You won! You did it in 1:01!”

Alexander comes forward with a fluffy towel, like the one hanging over his shoulders. “You’ll go down in Coach Thor’s will after that,” he jokes, kissing her cheek as he wraps the towel around her. Harvey swallows, unsure of what to say.

“Are you okay?” Concern seeps into his eyes. She opens her mouth to answer, but only a stutter comes out.

Susanna, a small blonde girl from the team, hands her a bottle of water.

“Thanks, I’m good,” Harvey answers, hiding the nausea at the thought of more water.

“Lightning Harvey! Lightning!” Thor takes off on a victory lap, giving high fives to everyone he passes. Harvey stays put, even though the hard tiles are becoming a painful seat.

“Oh, how did you do that?” Susanna asks, worried, coming closer. What is with these people? Suddenly, everyone seems to have googly eyes.

Harvey shrugs and looks away into the pool. “I have no idea.”

“No,” Susanna corrects. “Not your time. Your leg.” Her pale hand points to a thin wound going up the side of Harvey’s leg that hadn’t been there before. “You’re bleeding. Did you cut yourself on the tiles?”

Goosebumps rise on Harvey's arms as the image of the grinning Great White with her flesh between its teeth returns. "I have no idea."